

I Heard by [theamiableanachronism](#)

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Summary:

"353 days. I know. I heard."

I Heard

She slept that night in the hollow of a tree, her legs and arms knotted around her body to keep out the cold. Every few minutes she would doze off, only to be woken by the sounds in the woods. Most of them turned out to just be animals picking their way across leaves and twigs or an owl making a midnight flight through the treetops, but every rush of wind through the leaves reminded her of the crush of the Bad Men's footsteps across the forest floor, every squeak of a bat, the squeal of their radios as they scoured the woods for *her*. She'd waited, hiding beneath a fallen log, hoping against hope that they wouldn't find her, shrinking away from the beams of their flashlights as they scanned the forest floor. Eventually, they moved away and she seized her chance, running until she couldn't run anymore, trying not to think about how much she wanted to be running *to* Mike instead of away from him.

That was when she'd found her tree, using her last bit of energy to hole herself up inside it, trying to find a comfortable position to sleep away the pain, slipping in and out of a poor excuse for sleep.

But then, in the quietest part of the night, something new woke her up.

"El?"

Every muscle in her body tensed.

Mike.

She looked out into the darkness of the woods and saw nothing but the dark outlines of trees like her own.

Mike wasn't there.

But she could hear him.

His voice was faint and distant, like a bad radio connection. She craned her neck and squeezed her eyes shut, focusing what little energy she had left on trying to hear the words he was whispering.

Because he was whispering, part of the reason why he was so hard to hear. But it was only a short time ago that she'd been convinced she'd never hear that voice again, so even hearing it faintly was enough to fill her eyes with tears and make a lump grow in her throat. Her heart twisted as she realized how tired he sounded. Almost as exhausted as she felt.

"El? It's me. It's Mike. Um. It's three o'clock in the morning. I just. . . I thought I saw you tonight. Through the window." He stopped and El's heart fell. Was that all she was going to hear? It took everything in her to keep herself from jumping down from her tree to run all the way back to him. Only the memory of his house surrounded by the Bad Men, Bad Men who would hurt Mike to find her, kept her where she was. She sighed in relief when Mike kept going. "Was. . . was that really you? Because. . . well. . . I thought. . . I thought you were. . ." He stopped again, as if looking for the right words. "If—if you're out there and you can hear this, I hope you're okay. They were asking about you. Tonight. At the house. They questioned everybody. But I didn't tell them anything. I never would. Even if I knew where you are. Which. . ." His voice became so soft El almost couldn't hear it at all. "Where are you, El? I thought. . . I thought you were gone. I don't know if you're somewhere where you can talk, but if you can, please. . . I just need to know if you're okay." He stopped and when he spoke again his voice sounded fragile, ready to break at any moment. "I'll be here."

And then it was over. She strained, listening for something, anything, but this time he actually had stopped talking. There was no more.

She reached out into the silence, grasping for something that would tell her she wasn't completely alone.

But the silence was unforgiving, pounding in on her ears until it overwhelmed her.

Why had she heard him? She had no radio, no bath. Why could she hear him now? And why couldn't she hear him anymore? Had it all just been a dream? Her chin quivered and her attempts to muffle her sobs were the only sound she could hear until she cried herself into an uneasy and lonely sleep.